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NIETZSCHE AND THE PRESENT WAR

It is very satisfactory to some minds to summarize, and to other minds to have summarized for them, a nation's or a person's spirit into a catchword or an epigram. We hear of the poet of protest, or of nature, or the philosopher of war. Now this sounds well; these phrases make good catchwords; they tickle our pseudo-intellectual palates; but the trouble with them is that they are seldom true. Of course they contain an element of truth. But to summarize the complexities of a great movement into a catchword or a phrase is obviously impossible, if such a statement is really to be true.

There was a time when Nietzsche was widely read, not only in Germany, but elsewhere. Hence we must ask ourselves whether this widespread interest constitutes a real influence in shaping the German policies which led to the present war. But right here it becomes necessary to pause and to come to an understanding. When the question is stated as it has just been stated, and as it is frequently stated, Is it the influence of Nietzsche that has had a real influence in shaping the German policies which led to the present war? we must beware lest we commit the fallacy of Many Questions. We would seem to be asserting that Germany is the real cause of the war; and that is in no wise the issue here. Our question is more specialized than that. Our question really is this, Suppose that Germany had caused the present war (and that is a question which up to this time has been neither proved nor disproved), is it or is it not true that the philosophy of Nietzsche has had a dominating influence in German policies?

The fact that a writer is widely read neither proves nor disproves that he wields a dominating influence. During the past decade Oscar Wilde has had a tremendous vogue in Germany, and yet one would not say that what the German would call Wilde's *Lebensanschauung* has exercised a real influence upon Germany. On the other hand, neither is the possibility of a Nietzschean influence disproved by any such argument. It is perhaps true that it has been one of the moments which has

contributed to the present condition, but that is vastly removed from saying that it has had the dominating influence that so many ascribe to it.

Let us look at some characteristic views of Treitschke and Bernhardi and see whether they are Nietzschean; or, perhaps, whether they are not in reality entirely out of harmony with Nietzsche. The aim here is not to prove a conclusion, but to raise a question and to present evidence concerning it. In the discussions concerning the war and various problems arising out of it, there has been much misinterpretation and misquotation. In order to avoid such charge, and in order to present the evidence correctly, this discussion will use frequent quotations.

Before proceeding, let us keep in mind that Nietzsche's doctrine, in the first place, is essentially an individualism and an individualism of power; that it is the overman who has the rights which his will makes for him. In the second place, that the aristocracy of the powerful are under no obligation to consider the masses or their interests; in fact, the masses furnish merely a background whose function is to be of assistance and not a hindrance in the overman's march for power. In the third place, we must remember that pity is a mistaken ideal and that any ideal which does not enhance the achievement of power is low, indeed downright bad. But before proceeding from this point, it becomes necessary to recognize that another interpretation of Nietzsche has been made. In that interpretation Nietzsche is believed to mean by the pity which he condemns, nothing except a pity which weakens him who feels it, and encourages degeneracy in him for whom the pity is felt. Those who adopt this view of Nietzsche hold that it is incorrect to characterize his doctrine as an injunction to a wild and brutal scramble for power; that, on the contrary, he is condemning a tame acquiescence to circumstance, and that he is preaching a higher justice, tempered by love, and aiming at developing what is godlike in humanity. If this be the true interpretation of Nietzsche, then our present problem disappears. As this is not the usual interpretation, however, it remains necessary to consider on the basis of that conventional interpretation, what the

evidence is for regarding him as a dominant intellectual factor in the production of the present war situation.

The struggle for survival is the fundamental law of life; and, Bernhardi believes, any attempt to abolish war entirely is in direct opposition to this fundamental law. The struggle for existence is good biologically in so far that it restricts unhealthy development, and thus keeps the race healthy and strong. In the same way he regards war as really a biological necessity. We must not close our eyes to facts as they are. In human life we find the strong man, whether of intellect, of will, or of brawn, asserting himself; the ambitious strive to rise; and in this assertion and strife they are not always guided by any consciousness of abstract right. It is no doubt true that many men are controlled by unselfish motives, but in general, men's actions are determined by less praiseworthy feelings—desire for possessions, or honor, or revenge. It is true that in our State, as contrasted with a state of nature, the intensity of the rivalry of individuals or classes is restrained by the law, which punishes injustice and wrong. The law derives its authority from the State. The State has the power which is actively employed in advancing the moral and spiritual interests of society, and without that power the law would be a dead letter. But when we reach the higher stage, beyond individuals and groups, where is the check upon the injustice of one State to another? The only check which prevents injustice between States is force, and it is the duty of each State as a factor in civilization to use that force for the promotion of its ideals.

The foregoing might lead one to conclude a considerable similarity between Bernhardi and Nietzsche. But this similarity is seen to be merely superficial as soon as one reads further in Treitschke and Bernhardi and discovers that their view is essentially a Nationalism as over against Nietzsche's Individualism. Treitschke believes that the State is a moral community. "It is called upon to educate the human race by positive achievement, and its ultimate object is that a nation should develop in it and through it into a real character; that is alike to nation and to individuals the highest moral task." Bernhardi believes that individualism can never realize this ideal, He

would agree with Idealistic ethics when he says: "Man can only develop his highest capacities when he takes part in a community, in a social organism in which he lives and works. He must be in a family, in society, in the State which draws the individual out of the narrow circle in which he would otherwise pass his life, and makes him a worker in the great common interest of humanity." Schleiermacher was right when he believed that the individual can reach the highest degree of life only through the State.

From this ideal Bernhardi reaches the conclusion that war which is entered into in order to protect the highest and most valuable interests of a nation is not only permissible, but morally obligatory. In other words, political idealism calls for war, whereas materialism, in theory at least, repudiates it. Furthermore, political power is necessary in order to make the realization of a nation's ideals possible; without the development of its material power, the achievement of moral ideals would be only an empty dream. "If we grasp the conception of the State from this higher aspect we shall soon see that it cannot attain its great moral ends unless its political power increases. The higher object at which it aims is correlated to the advancement of its material interests."

"At the moment when the State cries out that its very life is at stake, social selfishness must cease and party hatred be hushed. The individual must forget his egoism, and feel that he is a member of the whole body. He should recognize that his own life is worth nothing in comparison with the welfare of the community. War is elevating because the individual disappears before the great conception of the State. The devotion of members of a community to each other is nowhere so splendidly conspicuous as in war. What a perversion of morality to wish to abolish heroism among men!"

How different is Nietzsche's belief that "Neither the State, nor the people nor mankind exists for its own sake; the climaxes, the great individuals are the goal, but this goal points far beyond mankind. From all this it is clear that the genius does not exist for the sake of mankind, he is the climax, the final goal of mankind."

Bernhardi says: "The functions of true humanity are twofold. On the one hand there is the production of the intellectual, moral, and military forces, as well as of political power, as the surest guarantee for the uniform development of character; on the other hand there is the practical realization of ideals, according to the law of love, in the life of the individual and the community." Nietzsche says: "What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will for power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that springs from weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is growing, that a resistance is overcome; *not* contentment, but more power, *not* peace as such; but war, *not* virtue, but efficiency." "I say yes to everything that makes life more beautiful, more intense, more worthy of being lived. If illusion and error develop life, I say yes to them. If hardness, cruelty, strategy, disregard of others, love of struggle, can increase the vitality of man, I say yes to evil and sin. If I believe that suffering helps the human race, I say yes to suffering. If science and morality diminish vitality, I say no to them."

Treitschke and Bernhardi, unlike Nietzsche, do not set up power in and for itself as their aim. Power is desirable and necessary only for the sake of the realization of an ideal. They disclaim adherence to the Machiavellian doctrine that the acquisition and advancement of power is the keynote of every policy. Treitschke says: "The State is not physical power as an end in itself, it is the power to protect and promote the higher interests; power must justify itself by being applied for the greatest good of mankind.

"The increase of this power is thus from this standpoint also the first and foremost duty of the State. This aspect of the question supplies a fair standard by which the morality of the actions of the State can be estimated. The crucial question is, how far has the State performed this duty, and thus served the interest of the community? And this not merely in the material sense, but in the higher meaning that material interests are justifiable only as far as they promote the power of the State, and thus indirectly its higher aims.

"The gulf between political and individual morality is not so

wide as is generally assumed. The power of the State does not rest exclusively on the factors that make up material power—territory, population, wealth, and a large army and navy; it rests to a high degree on moral elements, which are reciprocally related to the material. The energy with which a State promotes its own interests and represents the rights of its citizens in foreign States, the determination which it displays to support them on occasion by force of arms, constitute a real factor of strength, as compared with all such countries as cannot bring themselves to let things come to a crisis in a like case. Similarly a reliable and honorable policy forms an element of strength in dealing with allies as well as with foes.

“As regards the employment of war as a political means, our argument shows that it becomes the duty of a State to make use of the *ultima ratio* not only when it is attacked, but when by the policy of other States the power of the particular State is threatened, and peaceful methods are insufficient to secure its integrity. This power, as we saw, rests on a material basis, but finds expression in ethical values. War therefore seems imperative when, although the material basis of power is not threatened, the moral influence of the State (and this is the ultimate point at issue) seems to be prejudiced. Thus apparently trifling causes may, under certain circumstances, constitute a fully justifiable *casus belli* if the honor of the State, and consequently its moral prestige, are endangered. This prestige is an essential part of its power. An antagonist must never be allowed to believe that there is any lack of determination to assert the prestige, even if the sword must be drawn to do so.

“It must always be kept in mind that a State is not justified in looking only to the present, and merely consulting the immediate advantage of the existing generation. Such policy would be opposed to all that constitutes the essential nature of the State. Its conduct must be guided by the moral duties incumbent on it, which, as one step is gained, point to the next higher, and prepare the present for the future. ‘The true greatness of the State is that it links the past with the present and the future; consequently the individual has no right to regard the State as a means for attaining his own ambition in life.’”

To bring out the difference between this position and the doctrine of Nietzsche, a short quotation is sufficient: "You shall love peace as the means to new wars. And the short peace better than the long one. I do not counsel labor but battle. Let your labor be a battle, let your peace be a victory. You say 'it is the good cause that justifies the war?' I say unto you: it is the good war that justifies any cause."

Multiplication of such citations is unnecessary, for those given are sufficient to show wide divergence in point of view. Furthermore, suppose that Nietzsche had exercised great influence upon Treitschke and Bernhardi, his influence upon the German people would still be unsubstantiated, for Treitschke and Bernhardi really represent only a minority of the Germans—the military party. In fact, Bernhardi bemoans the peaceableness of the Germans, gives various causes for that state of mind, and believes that a rude shock is necessary to wake them out of it.

May I suggest a question without giving an answer? If the Nietzschean will for power, with its consequent disregard for the masses, is dominant in Germany, how can that be reconciled with the solicitude for the masses as shown in the various and numerous pensions to which the superannuated or incapacitated German falls heir, or with the workingmen's compensation measures, or with the general socialistic movement which is so tremendously strong, especially in Protestant Germany?

One may reply thus: Granted that the masses are not in harmony with Nietzsche's doctrine, it is the *Regierung* which acts in accordance with Nietzsche. By *Regierung* is meant either or both the house of Hohenzollern and the ruling houses of the various subsidiary German States. One may say that it is these who through the Bundesrath are trying to arrogate power to themselves, and that they are seeking their own greater power, and to trample under foot the masses, if that should become necessary. The answer would be: it has been not only the pretended, but the actually realized, policy of the *Regierung* to foster manufactures and foreign commerce in Germany. Now such a movement must essentially strengthen the middle classes, the makers and traders, at the expense of an aristocratic governing class, and therefore an economic policy would be incon-

sistent with a policy which aimed at the power of the few, the governing aristocracy. But one may say, by way of rejoinder, that under modern conditions a war can be waged successfully only by an economically strong country; and therefore the Regierung is willing to sacrifice a certain amount of power, since the ultimate result of such a sacrifice is its own greater strength. Upon the validity of this or a similar reply will rest the answer to the question suggested.

The laws of circumstantial evidence sanction conviction of a defendant only when every other hypothesis is proved impossible. Is the philosophy of Nietzsche a dominating influence in the Germany he so severely criticises, or is the Germany of to-day the result of a great complexity of causes?

Germany has ambitions toward empire, as have all her important neighbors. Her successes, beginning with the Great Elector, later under Frederick the Great, and culminating in 1870, have given her a sense of tremendous power. I quote Cramb, from that remarkable series of lectures, *Germany and England*: "Prussia strikes when her hour strikes, and in 1740 with the accession of Frederick the Great, that hour does strike; and for the next twenty-three years Prussia appears as the great rebel State, asserting herself triumphantly, measuring herself in battle against Austria and Austria's allies. All Europe cannot break her spirit or the spirit of her king. It is one of those lofty and exhilarating heroisms of world-history, this conflict of reality against formalism; of the substance of Frederick's military State against the phantom, the army of the Empire; of right and strength against boastful weakness parading as power, unrighteous privilege decking itself with the sanctity of history and right." In other words, historical, political, and economic, rather than philosophical influences may be sufficient to explain the attitude of Germany. Consequently, one can see that a case can be made out for another hypothesis, namely, that, on the theoretical side, the philosophy of Nietzsche is the expression of fundamental and deep-lying tendencies which on the practical side have expressed themselves in German economic and political conditions; that is, that the philosophy of Nietzsche may be an *effect* and not a cause. It is very doubt-

ful whether it is necessary to have Nietzsche in order to explain Germany's present attitude. There is no real reason against supposing that her ideas would have been the same, even though Nietzsche's doctrine had never been written.

This discussion is not written with any propagandist purpose. It has for its basis no personal desire to prove or disprove a causal connection between Nietzsche and the present war. It hopes merely to furnish a broader foundation for a judgment to be passed by each one interested upon the merits of the question itself.

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